

Opinions I

Dans cette rubrique nous accueillons des textes qui expriment un point de vue personnel sur l'homme et sur l'architecture.

In this column, we present texts that express a personal point of view on man and architecture.

An Architecture Indicative of Collective Use

(Lecture given at the Department of Architecture, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne on January 15, 1992)

As Ottokar Uhl has often emphasized, Austria has a leading role in tenant participation in housing with respect to Germany, France and Italy. Tenant participation in the actual building process is part of the Austrian tradition. As an architect, however, I am convinced that one must also be concerned with the visual reception of the built environment. Tenant participation and self-building are too often used as a pretext or as an ideological crutch by architects, to cover their own inability.

In an analysis of the political music of the Italian composer Nono, the musicologist Hans Vogt asked the question of whether a work can be judged according to social values and how, nevertheless, to ascertain an abstract, aesthetic value. In other words and applied to architecture, is the aim of providing low cost housing by means of tenant participation and self-build techniques compatible with an aesthetically valuable architecture?

I am aware of the fact that by asking this question I am moving between two camps. On one side are the representatives of a socially relevant design, on the other the artist architects who continue to insist on their autonomy.

The Vorarlberger architect Dietmar Eberle implied in a lecture held recently that there is a certain housing aesthetic for workers and small employees and another for an enlightened clientele. I find this attitude questionable.

In any case the *leitmotiv* of what follows is my concern with the aesthetic question.

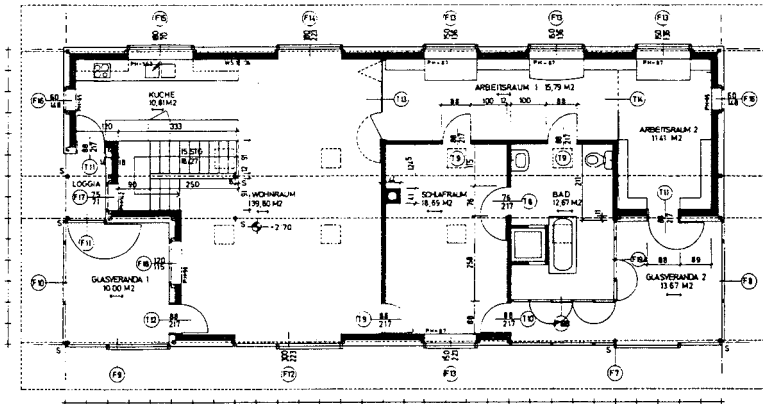
I would like to begin by showing you a single-family house as an example of building economically. One thing that should be stressed is that building simply is not just a matter of building cheap houses but a general attitude towards architecture.

House Pum - Sonderegger, Lochau

This house in Lochau is located on a site with a view of Lake Constance.

In plan it is co-ordinated by a 60cm grid, which is evident in the exposed joists. Its rooms are interconnected and allow a wide variety of circulation paths throughout the house.

Its elevation is determined by the width of its untreated larch siding. The windows are visually differentiated according to whether they are fixed or openable. External sliding windows were chosen because when open they are not visible inside and thus lessen the threshold between inside and outside.



House Pum — Sonderegger, Lochau (Michael Loudon, architect)

A corridor runs through the entire length of the back of the house. One end is occupied by the kitchen, the part adjacent to the bedrooms by two work-study rooms that can be opened up. The corridor is not a residual space - it is lived in.

The hardware in the house is what can be purchased at any hardware store. A conscious attempt was made to avoid detail fetishism of a technical nature. If there is anything special about this house it is in the way the rooms relate to one another. The owner wanted to sit in his bathtub and look out at the lake. The bath was not treated as a subordinate room but given an autonomous character and integrated with respect to the circulation.

Everyday materials and building methods were used in this house. I think there is a certain poetics of materials that age naturally. For example the untreated siding will turn gray sooner on the outside than it will in the winter garden.

Literature and architecture

I often ask myself if there are parallels between literature and architecture. The largely autodidact Maxim Gorki did bring new aspects to literature. Realism was nothing new at the time (Chekov was for example a contemporary) but Gorki succeeded in incorporating everyday language. The pathos evident in his work is perhaps also a result of the trivial literature that formed his literary education until he was twenty. His popularity among the Russian people is based in part on this pathos but also made it easier to misuse his works for propaganda purposes. Ferdinand Celine, who worked as general practitioner in the poor districts of Paris, developed a radical way of writing. His tough, telegraphic style is based on argot. I find his first novels "Journey to the End of the Night" and "Death on Credit" unexcelled in their immediacy.

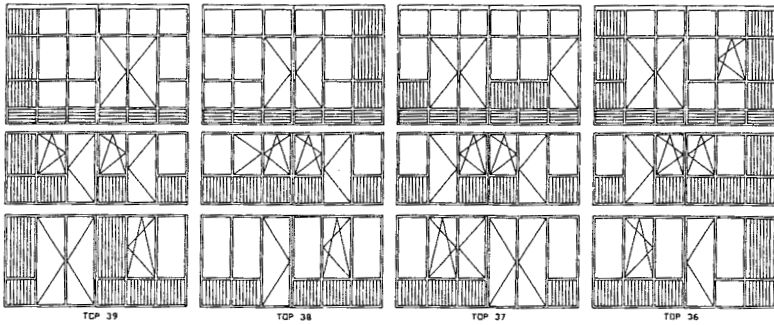
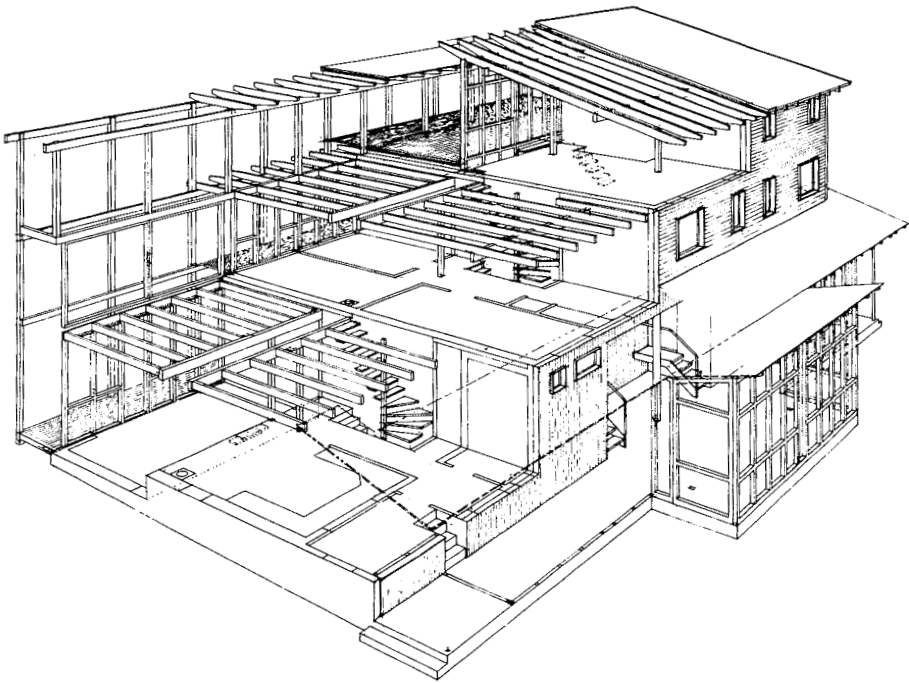
Another remarkable novel in this respect, dry and direct, is "The Stranger" by Camus. I find it interesting that model for "The Stranger" were the novels of James Cain. Cain wrote detective stories like "Double Identity" or "The Postman Always Rings Twice".

What all these authors have in common is that they put everyday phenomena through the filter of their critique to arrive at new ways of looking at reality. The question is, whether similar processes and possibilities are available in architecture.

Housing project Wuhrbaumweg, Bregenz

The row houses in the Wuhrbaumweg project in Bregenz have a simple primary structure of brick and wood that allows the tenants a wide range of possible design variants. No two houses are identical in plan. The tenants are committed to work a minimum of 800 hours - 400 for their own house and 400 for communal purposes. This type of self-building necessitates exact planning and preparation. The tenants work in self appointed groups that are trained by qualified personnel who coordinate all phases of building.

The aim in tenant participation in building, aside from its economic aspects, is that functioning communities will develop that can administer themselves. The prerequisites for self administration are to be found in the freedom of the tenants to choose their neighbours and in mutual participation during the building process.



Special attention was paid to the threshold between the private and the public in the Wuhrabaumweg project. Access corridors are wide, sunny spaces are expanded in places to accommodate informal activities. These corridors are augmented by a variety of multi-purpose rooms.

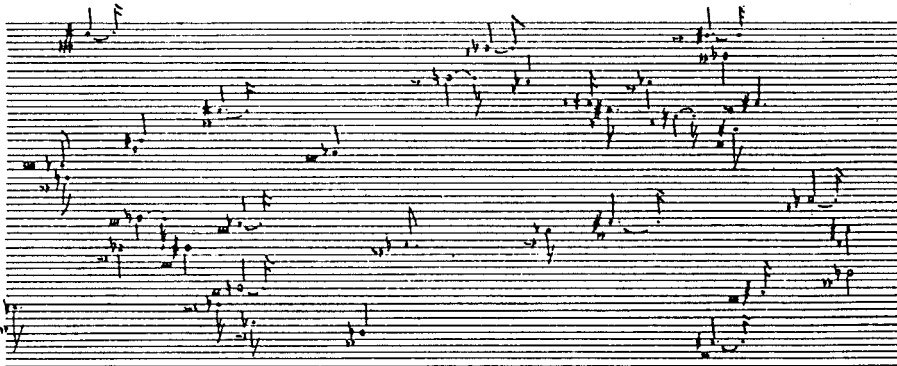
The facade is constructed as a wooden framework. The users decide where they want opaque panels, fixed or openable windows. They themselves build these elements in.

Aleatoric music

The architect Josef Frank propagated an architecture that should be designed as if it had happened by chance. In this case the chance generator is the user and not the architect. I see in this development the possibility of new aesthetic.

One could compare this tendency with aleatoric music, where the composer determines a certain framework within which the musicians can play. These are two notations from the 1950's. One sees that the composer, although he allows the musicians almost free hand, could not restrain from putting his signature underneath like a graphic artist.

One must, however, face the facts. Self-building often develops a dynamic of its own. Things often happen that we as architects don't especially want. For example, the tenants have completely covered the wooden facades with metal roller blinds and painted their individual houses in a variety of colours although a general consensus concerning colours had been arrived at.



Erik Bruun (Nov. 52)

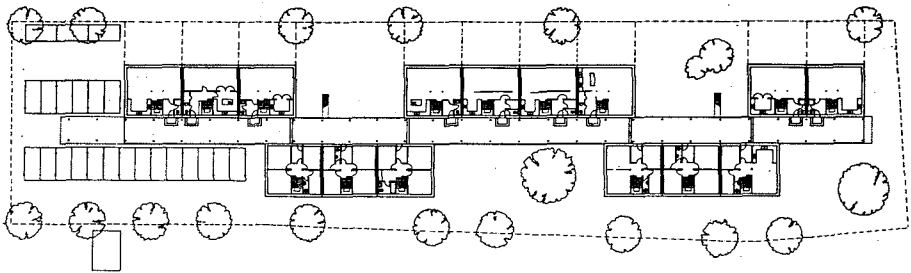
Housing project Lohnserstrasse, Sulz

The frame of reference for the housing in the Lohnserstrasse was the Viennese garden city movement between the wars. House types of a similar simplicity were strived for. Structurally each house has four surrounding walls and two interior wooden columns. A variety of neutral rooms can be determined by the user.

A one hundred meter long corridor serves as an access to the houses. It has been appropriated by the tenants as a semi-private ante-room to their houses as well as an informal meeting place. The houses to the north of the corridor use the roof of the corridor as a terrace.

The tenants choose the location of their windows within the grid set up by the visible ceiling joists. To accentuate the random order of these windows, sliding shutters were used to give the elevations a dynamic, operational character.

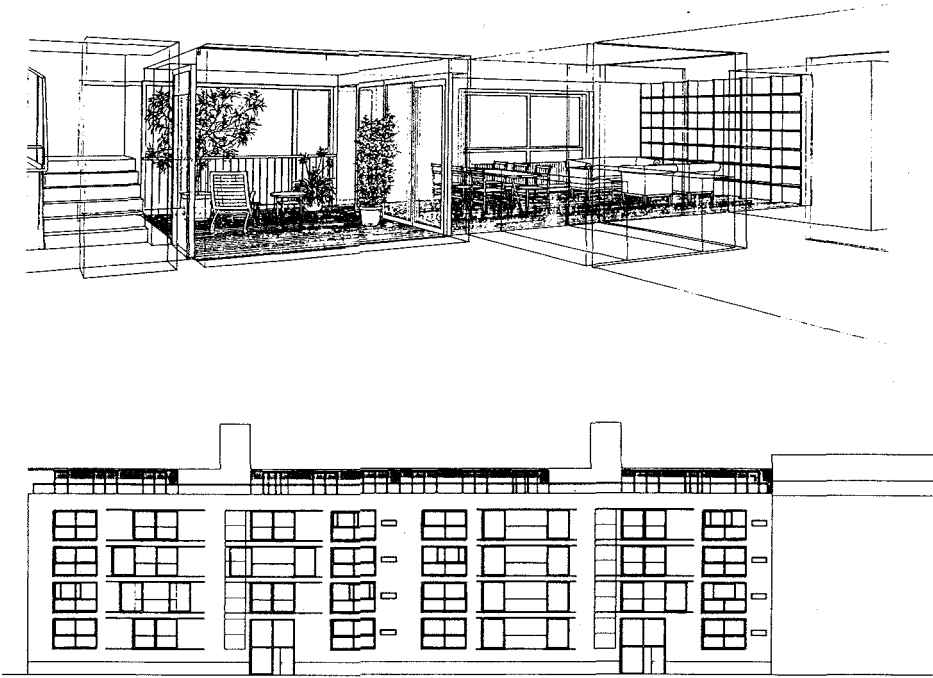
As a conclusion I mention a project that I have recently been involved with. It is in many respects a continuation of the ideas developed in Vorarlberg, in other respects a certain reevaluation of those concepts.



Housing Project Lohnserstrasse, Sulz (Michael Loudon, architect)

Apartment building in the Heinrich-Lefler-Gasse, Vienna

My architecture has become increasingly reductive in an attempt to be more neutral and expedient. Within the restraints of subsidized housing small innovations are possible. It's not a question of visual utopias for a better world or even a visual correlate of an intact one, but perhaps a matter of being a wolf in sheep clothing. To rethink the set rules of housing and implement alternatives, it is necessary to use given connotations in a way that is subtly different but readily acceptable by the client.



Apartment building in the Heinrich-Lefler-Gasse, Vienna (Michael Loudon, architect)

In this building in Vienna, apartments with neutral rooms, that have more than one possible entry, are planned to lengthen paths of circulation. Sight axis are similarly planned to be as long as possible.

Entry is through a room that is functionally ambivalent. It serves as a corridor, a winter garden, a loggia and in summer as an extension of the living space. This space can be closed by means of external sliding glass doors. The window in the living area is of an identical size to accentuate the continuation of inside and outside. The street elevation shows a possible positioning of the windows.

The static, contemplative reception of architecture is bound to undergo change. An alternative might be an architecture of immediate collective reception, an architecture indicative of collective use.

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